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OBITUARIES

William J. Casey, former head of central intelligence; dead at 74

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WASHINGTON - The former director of central intelligence, William J. Casey, died in a New York hospital yesterday. He was 74.

Mr. Casey, who died of pneumonia at 1:15 a.m., had been in intensive care for nearly two weeks. In December doctors removed a cancerous tumor from his brain.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said yesterday, "It really is the passing of an era. I think Bill Casey was sort of a larger-than-life director of the CIA and I think he's going to be remembered that way."

Mr. Casey began his intelligence career during World War II, running spies behind enemy lines in Germany for the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency.

His critics and admirers say that, during his tenure at the CIA, he heavily emphasized covert operations, perhaps trying to recreate the action-oriented setting of his wartime years.

Evidence emerging from the congressional hearings on the Iran-contra affair indicates Mr. Casey may have played a far more central role in the illegal shipment of arms than he ever admitted.

Over the past five years, Mr. Casey raised storms of controversy for secretly mining the harbors of Nicaragua, - a move condemned by an international court - for issuing a "white paper" charging the Sandinista government of Nicaragua with shipping arms to rebels in El Salvador, a conclusion shown later to have dubious foundation; and for inventing stories about a Libyan "hit squad" formed to assassinate President Reagan, to justify a buildup in the administration's antiterrorist program.

A congressional official who once worked in the CIA told a reporter for The Boston Globe last week that Mr. Casey "was a very

independent-minded old fellow. He pretty much did what he wanted to do" and "did not need somebody else's legal opinion."

He said "Casey was not the kind to scribble the way Colonel North did. When he had a phone call with somebody he had had business dealings with, he would not write a memo." He liked to carry out what the official called "vest-pocket operations." Lt. Col. Oliver North was fired as a National Security Council aide over the Iran-contra controversy.

During his confirmation hearings to become CIA director, the Senate Intelligence Committee, after an investigation into his financial background, found Mr. Casey merely "not unfit to serve" in the post.

Mr. Casey was Reagan's campaign manager in the 1980 election, and was accused at the time of providing purloined debate briefing papers from Reagan's opponent, President Jimmy Carter - though Mr. Casey's involvement in the matter was never proved.

Mr. Casey became CIA director in 1981, after Reagan was elected. His longtime personal friendship with Reagan gave the CIA much greater influence over White House policy than had been the case in recent years - which reportedly led to great boosts in budgets and morale inside the agency. Mr. Casey resigned this past February after the brain surgery left him debilitated.

President Reagan said, "The nation and all those who love freedom honor today the name and memory of Bill Casey."

Robert Dole (R-Kans.), the Senate minority leader and presidential candidate, called Mr. Casey "a true American patriot." Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate committee investigating the Iran-contra affair, said of the inquiry's findings, "Whatever may be the final judgment of his role in this event, it should not obscure Mr. Casey's distinguished record of commitment to this country."

Many critics of the CIA's practices had less sympathetic words. Andrew Cockburn, author of a forthcoming book on the history of the intelligence community, said yesterday, "Casey embodied the utter ruin and corruption of US intelligence. The vague ideal that intelligence should be objective in providing analysis to the nation's leaders didn't interest him at all. He was a partisan figure determined that his agency should provide intelligence besuited to the administration's intentions. He was fully prepared to break the law. It's ironic that he should shuffle off this mortal coil just when the totally disastrous consequences of his sort of policy are being publicly aired on Capitol Hill."

Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), a member of the House Intelligence Committee, defended Mr. Casey's approach, saying, "Relations with Congress were never what they should have been because Bill Casey distrusted Congress, and with some justification, concerning Congress' ability to keep a secret."

In the years between the OSS and the CIA, Mr. Casey amassed a fortune as a Wall Street lawyer, and also served in the Nixon and Ford administrations as head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, assistant secretary of state for economic affairs and president of the Export-Import Bank. He ran for Congress from Long Island, N.Y., in 1966, but was defeated.

Mr. Casey and his wife Sophia Kurz had one daughter, Bernadette.